

# Democrats and Republicans use House hearing on social media “disinformation and extremism” to advance internet censorship

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A joint hearing entitled “Disinformation Nation: Social Media’s Role in Promoting Extremism and Misinformation” was held on Thursday by two subcommittees of the House Committee on Energy and Commerce and at which the CEOs of Facebook, Google and Twitter testified.

The hearing—hosted jointly by the Subcommittee on Communications and Technology and the Subcommittee on Consumer Protection and Commerce—began at noon and lasted for more than five hours.

After the respective committee and subcommittee chairpersons gave their opening statements, Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg, Google (Alphabet) CEO Sundar Pichai and Twitter CEO Jack Dorsey delivered their prepared remarks. This was followed by statements and questioning of the tech CEOs by dozens of representatives for five minutes each.

This was the first congressional hearing to ostensibly address the role of online platforms in the January 6 assault on the US Capitol and fascistic coup attempt orchestrated by Donald Trump and congressional Republicans to overturn the results of the 2020 presidential elections. Other topics brought up during the hearing were online information about the pandemic and the COVID-19 vaccines, racist and anti-Asian violence and the growth of teen suicide in the US.

There were also proposals for modifications to the Section 230 provisions of the Communications Decency Act of 1996 that provide immunity for online platforms from third-party content.

To say that none of these subjects was addressed in any comprehensive or clarifying manner during the

hearing would be an understatement. Instead, in the longstanding formula for such hearings in the US House of Representatives, the proceeding was used by Democrats and Republicans as an opportunity to advance their respective political agendas.

These positions both call for government regulation of online platforms from slightly different but nonetheless equally reactionary positions. They can be summarized as follows: The Democrats are demanding that social media and internet content—especially left-wing criticism of the Biden administration considered “divisive,” “harmful” and “extremist”—be directly regulated by the government. The Republicans are demanding that the government intervene to halt supposed “discrimination” against extreme right-wing and fascist ideology and organizations online and that these be protected by “free speech” rights.

The Democratic Party position was articulated by Energy and Commerce Committee Chairman Frank Pallone of New Jersey in his opening statement. Pallone said, “The dirty truth is ... the more outrageous and extremist the content, the more engagement and views these companies get from their users. ... The time for self-regulation is over. It is time we legislate to hold you accountable.”

The Republican stance was outlined by Ranking Member Cathy McMorris-Rodgers in her opening remarks which included, “You’ve broken my trust. Yes, because you’ve failed to promote the battle of ideas and free speech. Yes, because you censor political viewpoints you disagree with. Those polarizing actions matter for democracy.”

The absurdity that the House hearing would address the use of social media and online technologies by

extreme right-wing groups to organize the January 6 attack on the US Capitol was exposed by the fact that the subject was barely discussed at all. The name Donald Trump—whose Twitter and Facebook accounts were suspended after the elections—was hardly mentioned other than by Republicans protesting this suspension as “censorship.”

Even though there is publicly available information that the Proud Boys used social media to recruit members, raise funds and gather military-style equipment prior to January 6, nothing new about this question was reported by the tech CEOs or uncovered by the representatives.

It is not surprising that the role of social media in the fascist insurrection against the US Constitution was not discussed, even though two-thirds of the 26 Republicans on the House Energy and Commerce Committee voted against the certification of the 2020 election results. This vote took place after the Capitol was cleared of the rampaging mob that attempted to stop the vote from taking place and threatened to kill members of Congress and Vice President Pence.

Among those who voted against the certification of the election results, for example, was Republican Representative Steve Scalise of Louisiana, who was permitted to use his five minutes to berate the tech CEOs about “fairness” and “anti-conservative bias.”

He demanded that Twitter CEO Dorsey explain why Twitter is continuing to allow a *Washington Post* article to be shared regarding the taped phone conversation between Donald Trump and the Georgia Secretary of State where the former president said, “What I want to do is this. I just want to find 11,780 votes, which is one more than [the 11,779 vote margin of defeat] we have, because we won the state.”



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